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Book Review: Contemporary American Women: Our Defining Passages

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Contemporary American Women: Our Defining Passages.

Compiled & edited by: Carol Smallwood, Cynthia Brackett-Vincent
All Things That Matter Press: 2009. 250pp(paperback) 978-0-9842594-3-4.
\$18.99.

Reviewed by Annarina Koivu¹

“Contemporary American Women: Our Defining Passages” features a collection of multicultural narratives by American women from diverse backgrounds and life experiences. The overarching theme focuses on female identity and the various milestones of a woman’s life: the determining turning points regarding our physical and spiritual selves, career paths, as well as the relationship with family and loved ones.

The collection compiles fifty-three non-fiction articles by more than thirty-five women who are very brave to share some of the most intimate and sometimes the most painful moments of their life. The collection addresses topics from childlessness and alcoholism to sexual assault and a child’s suicide, yet it is not a book on victims but fighters. A particularly touching account is that of Marcy Simons, who was devastated on so many levels having experienced sexual violence by a perpetrator who additionally told her that she “will have to do” as he could not find the ‘prettier’ roommate. Feeling shame and guilt, Marcy kept the details of the attack to herself for years. Later in her life she signed up to be a victim’s advocate. During the training she disclosed to the director being a victim herself but to her surprise, the director said “the most powerful thing” to her: “No, you’re not. You are a survivor”. (p.178) That message – being a survivor instead of a victim – can be seen as an underlying theme for many articles of the collection.

Not all the articles describe such tragic and traumatising events as that which Marcy encountered. Finding a perfectly fitting pair of jeans, being a Scout mom, adopting ex-racer greyhounds, and completing Ropes Facilitator training when you have always avoided physical activity reflect the more positive challenges in women’s lives. Cathryn Cofell is a “woman on the verge” in her accordingly named story on turning thirty-five. Her story offers humorous and witty remarks on how modern society and media perceive the ageing of women: “Laura Linney, receiving a *lifetime* achievement award at the age of forty-three? What’s next for her, the nursing home? Or Britney [Spears], who for most of her illustrious career couldn’t even legally drink or go to an R-rated movie without supervision, in talks to author an autobiography? Of what, I wonder? Life in the birth canal?” (p.56).

There are also other women who are “on the verge”. One theme reoccurring throughout the collection is that often we have plans for our lives, but life may have other plans for us. In *Anger in the house: writing, reading, and mothering* things are going well for Nicole Willey. She and her husband have tenure-track jobs in academia; she gets pregnant after only three months of trying and they buy their dream house. In fact they “could not have scripted a better life” for themselves (p.29). Except that life does not follow the script. Between half-day work plan (Nicole teaching mornings and her husband evenings) the new baby is passed from one spouse to the other as quickly as possible, and the new parents have no time to spend together. Moreover, Nicole still

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needs to grade 500 papers per semester and her publication plans are not moving forward, either. Tired and preoccupied with professional development, Nicole feels that she is missing her son's babyhood. Later on comes the overwhelming anger. Somewhere along the line between the first-born growing old enough to pee on the TV and a second baby being colicky, things become too much for Nicole. On one particular occasion, she has to leave the room in order not to physically hurt her child. What helps Nicole and her family make it through this time is that Nicole finally allows herself to identify fully the universal struggles of being a (working) mother even when these struggles include feelings of anger and helplessness.

Carol Smallwood and Cynthia Brackett-Vincent, the editors of *Contemporary American Women*, are accomplished writers who have won various awards for their literary work. Whilst they have made a choice to compile a collection of stories from American, well-educated, close to middle age, previously published women – in other words women like themselves – the stories are truly universal. Losing a spouse, facing illness or one's ageing body or trying to balance small children and work are challenges to which most women can relate to at some point in their life. Even if the reader's life situation would be different – for example she or he does not have children or a spouse – the honesty of the articles encourages the reader to walk in the writer's shoes. However, the reader is left wondering how different or same would the stories have been if the writers would have not had the repertoire of coping mechanisms, awareness and ability to self-reflect which may come with increased education and being verbally oriented. Additionally, would the stories have been the same had the women not had some financial security (or at least future prospects of it) which the most of them seem to have?

For many writers of the collection, in crisis, writing becomes a tool for seeking consolation, acceptance, inspiration and liberation. This happens to Sarah Bartlett, who hesitantly entered the meeting of Women Writing for a Change as she was convinced that she had utterly nothing to say. However, she found out that whatever she wrote “these women HEARD” her and mirrored back the “pain and confusion, determination and strength” (p.64). She tells: “Questions posed in weekly classes – how much is enough? what matters? who am I? – were but a few of the markers along my Women Writing path. While I was being menopausally miserably, challenged by childhood chaos and fraught with feelings of failure, Women Writing was the lifeline that pulled me through. I gained perspective and more – acceptance as a woman with more questions than answers” (p.64). Thus, not only the milestones and crises in women's lives shape women, also women can define the passages of their lives by the acts of writing, communicating and sharing.

In closing, the essential message of the articles is hope and empowerment. Sarah Bartlett concludes: “we write toward the change we want to see in our lives, and in the world” (p.65). The women seek to reclaim ownership of their lives, take back the night, and in the words of Jodie Lawson, one of the writers with more political approach, “use [their] cumulative knowledge and social position to demand an end to oppression and discrimination, in all their forms.”(p.173)